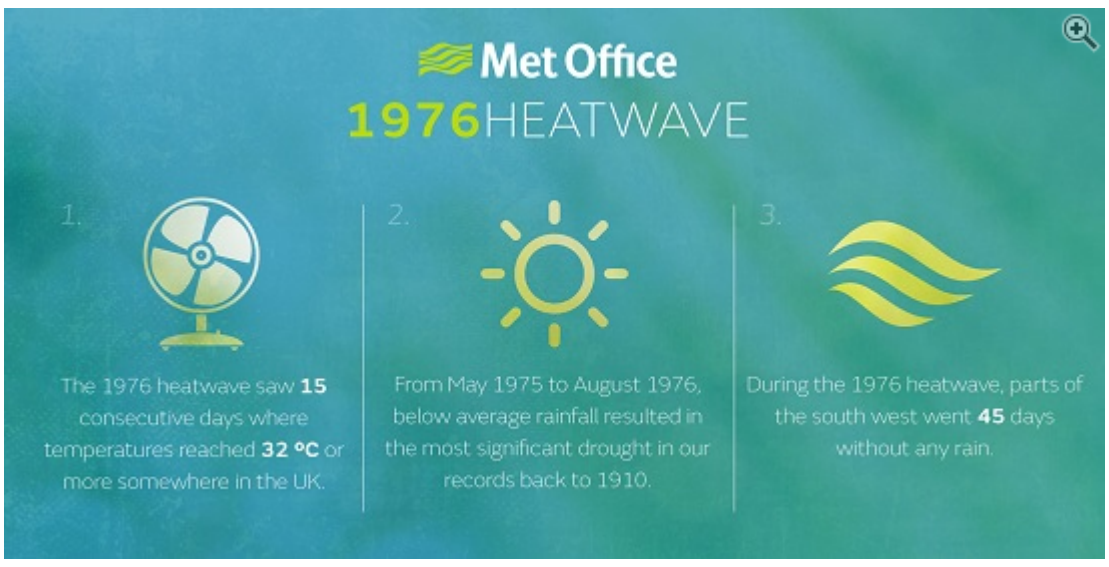
Anniversary of record breaking 1976 heatwave

1 July 2016 - 40 years ago this weekend temperatures peaked in one of the UK's most memorable heat waves.

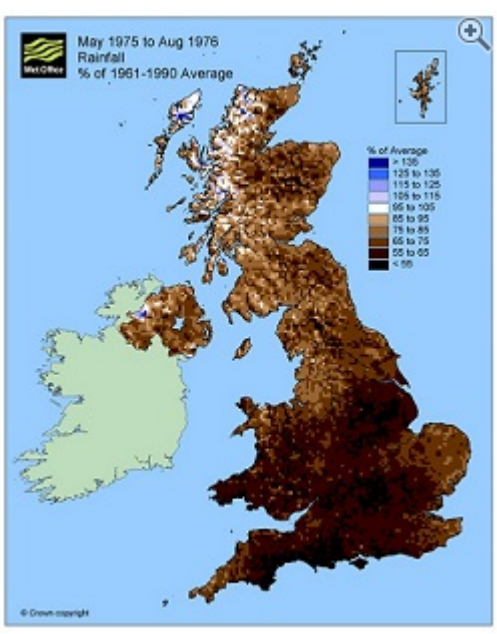
The spell of hot weather, from mid-June to the end of August included 15 consecutive days where a maximum temperature of 32C or more was recorded somewhere in the UK. It was one of the most prolonged heat waves within living memory.


Met Office
1976HEATWAVE
1.
The 1976 heatwave saw 15 consecutive days where temperatures reached 32 °C or more somewhere in the UK.
2.
From May 1975 to August 1976, below average rainfall resulted in the most significant drought in our records back to 1910.
3.
During the 1976 heatwave, parts of the south west went 45 days without any rain.

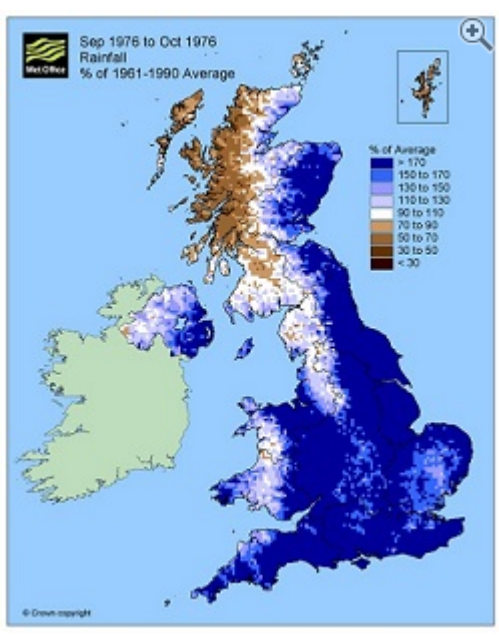
1976 heatwave infographic

The highest temperature recorded in June 1976 was 35.6 C in Southampton on the 28th. This record still stands. Whilst 35.9 C, recorded on 3rd in Cheltenham, was the highest July temperature.

However what really set the summer of '76 apart was the drought. Below average rainfall was notable from May 1975 to August 1976 resulting in one of the most significant droughts of our climate records and making summer 1976 (June, July, August) the 2nd driest summer on record (dating back to 1910) behind 1995.



Rainfall map May 1975 to Aug 1976



Rainfall Map Sept to Oct 1976

Parts of the south west went 45 days without any rain in July and August. The hot, dry weather affected domestic water supplies leading to widespread water rationing; many still remember queuing for water at standpipes in the street. The National Water Council took out full page ads in newspapers on how to 'beat the drought' advising steps such as only taking a bath if absolutely necessary and using no more than five inches of water.

As crops failed and food prices subsequently increased, a Drought Act was passed by the government, a Minister for Drought appointed and plans to tanker water in from abroad were discussed. Heath and forest fires broke out in parts of southern England, with 50,000 trees being destroyed in Dorset alone.

So why was the weather so dry and hot? During the summer of 1976 the jet stream was further north than usual and there was often high pressure covering the British Isles, while pressure was below normal over much of the Arctic, the Azores, and eastern Europe.

In June and July, both high pressure and southerly winds were more frequent than usual. August was generally the driest month of the summer, and was characterised by exceptionally dominant high pressure.

The drought broke in the last week of August with severe thunderstorms bringing rain to some places for the first time in weeks. September and October 1976 were both very wet months.

The 1975-76 drought was the most significant drought for at least the last 150 years in the UK, and is usually regarded as a 'benchmark' against which all other droughts are compared.

Black and white photograph courtesy of Hull Daily Mail

Last updated: 1 July 2016